

# THE PRACTICAL PALEOGRAPHER

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Issue 39 of *Medieval Feminist Forum* included a number of articles about the results of working in the “archives,” or the manuscript room, as many libraries refer to this area. Maybe those articles have prompted you to long for days spent in the archives yourself. Having just spent the summer doing manuscript research in the British Library and the Lambeth Palace Library, and meanwhile putting together *MFF* Issue 39, I thought I might include some “practical advice” in our archive issue, part II. Necessarily bound by my own discipline and specialization, I will most specifically refer to British manuscripts and practices; however, many of the same principles apply to other areas of the world.

First let me say how strongly I agree with the authors of the previous articles—paleographical training is a neglected skill in medieval studies programs. Many of us do learn “hit

or miss,” on our own, and through continuing education, such as continuing education workshops. There are problems with both of these methods. The “hit or miss” process, many times, results in a “miss.” Continuing education seminars tend to be geared towards the lowest common denominator. Finding one for the Ph.D. who needs assistance can be difficult. In fact, finding one for the advanced graduate student in need is almost as difficult—many of these seminars and workshops are designed to acquaint advanced undergraduates or master’s students with the basics (or the souped-up basics), or, they are designed for entertainment.

Secondly, I believe it is particularly important for women to engage in paleographical research, not only as recovery, but also as redefinition. Although the focus of feminist scholarship has shifted from recovery work to reexamination of texts, there

is still vital recovery work to be done. Many texts related to women, particularly related to women and religion, remain unedited, untranslated, and even, occasionally, unearthed. Beyond this, however, there remains the task of reevaluating older editions, such as those published by the Early English Text Society (EETS), with an eye towards presentation and discussion of feminist and gender studies.

Although I am now fairly adept at negotiating the archives, before I undertook my first trip to the manuscript room, I felt overwhelmed. I had little idea how to prepare, and many of these suggestions are based on my own adventures. Before undertaking research at an archive deposit, it is imperative to discern what reader requirements they have. Some require reservations many months in advance, while some will allow you same-day access. The British Library, for example, will allow university professors to acquire a general library card without proof of status beyond your ID card. The British Library

Manuscript Room, however, requires a letter from one of your university officials in order to grant access to the manuscripts themselves. Once you have provided this letter, they will keep it in your file, and keep it active for a number of years. Other institutions have different requirements, although the majority will require a letter such as the one described above. A number of archival deposits will also ask you for a passport-sized photograph. These you may purchase at a local store, or bring with you from home. The best place to determine what you need before you arrive is the site's website. These generally list reader requirements, manuscript restrictions, and opening hours. You might also find traveling directions, maps, local information, and other practical advice. Be sure to note any extended closures for remodeling or renovation, as these often occur during the summer months.<sup>1</sup>

Letters of introduction can sometimes be sent ahead so that your readership is confirmed upon your arrival. However, trusting the vagaries of assorted



postal systems may not always be rewarded. Similarly, trusting in file maintenance may not always be advisable, either. In the summer of 2004, I arrived in London with plans to spend three weeks working on manuscripts. I was somewhat surprised to learn that my reader file at the British Library had been partially "misplaced," including my necessary letter of introduction. Luckily, I had brought with me several additional (though updated) letters of introduction signed by my university's president. I would strongly suggest that anyone planning to undertake an extended research tour do the same—you never know when your original will be misplaced or misfiled.

No archival deposit allows pens or ink near the manuscripts themselves. While you can certainly purchase pencils after arriving at your destination, I suggest bringing mechanical pencils with you. These never need sharpening, are refillable yet ultimately disposable, and are more distinguishable than a basic "no. 2." To accompany your pencils, I suggest

notebooks without spiral binding or loose-leaf paper. Both of these items will cause fewer raised eyebrows when your bags are being searched than will binders and wire-bound books. You will likely want to bring other paper-related items such as sticky notes and large erasers as well.

Electronic equipment is also invaluable in archival research. Having a reliable laptop is crucial, and many institutions have power outlets at designated workstations. If you are not a resident of the country in which you are working, be sure to bring appropriate power and outlet adaptors. I would also suggest a small surge protector, with or without an extension cord. Although this may sound like overkill, several county archives I spent time at had awkwardly located outlet locations, a difficulty overcome by my mini-surge protector. Beyond your laptop and accoutrements, there are a few other electronic tools you might consider utilizing. Electronic dictionaries and personal organizers may come in handy, as might digital voice recorders

and the like. One tempting device is a handheld scanner. While these tools are wonderful for other forms of research, the majority of archival deposits will not allow their use in the manuscript room.

Beyond these basics, there are other items that will assist you in your paleographical research. While some archives have magnifying glasses available for use by patrons, others do not. I suggest bringing at least one with you. If you bring more than one, you might consider bringing one with an internal light, although occasionally these are not allowed by the curators. A clear plastic ruler marked in both imperial and metric units is useful as well. All of these items may be carried into most manuscript rooms. For ease during the search and screening processes, I put my small items (pencils, erasers, ruler, etc.) in clear, resealable baggies, which negates my having to remove each item from another case.

There are ways to make your archive experience more physically comfortable as well.

Many places are kept cooler than average in order to better preserve texts. It is advisable to wear layers of clothing into the manuscript room even if it is blazingly hot outside. Similarly, be sure to provide yourself with tissues in case you, like me, are allergic to mold, and get a runny nose after pouring over thirteenth-century vellum for several hours. Even more practically, try to avoid sleeves that dangle annoyingly, and if you have long hair like I do, be sure to bring hair ties with you. You might laugh now, but wait until your hair falls into your face repeatedly, and then you will thank me for this advice!

Once you have your readership secured, your materials gathered, and your trip planned, you might want to consider what to do with your manuscript before randomly showing up. Even if you are preparing a translation without a facing page original, it is a good idea to begin with a straight transcription of your manuscript.<sup>2</sup> It is your choice whether to expand scribal abbreviations or not, but whatever your choice is,



I suggest that you mark your expansions in some way. Other transcription conventions include: retain original capitals; transcribe u, v, j, and i as they appear; retain special characters, such as the thorn, eth, and yogh; enclose words or letters damaged in the original in angle brackets; and, enclose words or letters deleted by the scribe in square brackets. As with the expansion of abbreviations, it is your decision whether or not you wish to expand the Tyronian *et* into "and," but whatever your choice is, be consistent. Finally, before beginning your transcription, be sure to note carefully the size and condition of the manuscript, its composition material(s), the number of lines per folio, and the prickings marking each line. You should further describe the ink and ink colors as well as the handwriting style if it can be discerned. (For example, is the manuscript written in a "clear, bold, anglicana"?) I also find it useful to have a "cheat sheet" among my notes that contains a list of common scribal abbreviations. Of course I know these by heart, but occasionally, whether

flustered by an unrelated event, or faced with a particularly bad scribal hand, it is a security blanket of sorts to know that the list is there to consult if I should so need.

It is often useful to consult a facsimile of your manuscript before handling the item itself if at all possible. This will allow you to familiarize yourself with the scribal hand and its peculiarities. A facsimile will also usually contain an extensive description of the manuscript which makes your initial evaluation easier. The vocabulary necessary to discuss your manuscript—quiring, binding, folio, leaves, etc.—will be found in a facsimile, and many of these aspects will be covered in great detail.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, many facsimiles provide an overview of the history of the manuscript, from production to current shelving, if it is known. This can be a useful source for you, as editor or translator.

Beyond these practical tips, there are a few other scholarly practicalities to discuss. Indices specific to your field

of study are invaluable. For instance, if you are a Middle English scholar, you will want to consult with the *Index of Printed Middle English Prose*, *The Index of Middle English Verse*, *The Manual of Writings in Middle English*, and the various volumes of the *Index of Middle English Prose*.<sup>4</sup> There are similar collections for specific libraries and for other languages that individual scholars should locate and consult prior to their adventure. Other resources to consult include bibliographies and specialized dictionaries, such as the *Middle English Dictionary*. Finally, you should be sure to consult with a handwriting manual that covers your era of manuscripts, if even as a refresher course.<sup>5</sup>

I have written this article from the perspective of a scholar who works in the archives out of personal desire—for scholarly curiosity, for historical interest, and for publication purposes. This means that after my work in the archives is completed, I have decisions to make. An archival bit might become part of a longer work, a book or an article, or a transcription

and/or a translation might be an article on its own. Whatever the case, I need to be confident enough in my archival skills and experience to trust that I obtained the materials needed to complete my project. On a feminist scholarship note, I have yet another decision to make—how to handle “tricky” words, like “mankind” and the generic use of the masculine pronoun. Should I use humankind? Humanity? Persons? Each carries a different connotation, and the choice will shape the final product. Similarly, do I want to render “he” where it is used generically as “he/she,” “he or she,” or “s/he”? Of course, the publisher might make these decisions via a policy; but I still decide how I want my work presented originally.<sup>6</sup>

Even armed with only a little experience, archival research can be a transcendent experience. Remember, if all else fails and you break down utterly, you are at minimum sitting there touching an actual manuscript written in 1130 CE (or 830 or 1430—you get the point). No matter how many times I use an archival deposit, I never quite



get over my sense of awe and wonder ("I'm touching it! I'm really touching it!"). To me, using a manuscript or other original document is never a casual affair, and I would urge you, try not to lose your own sense of marvel even when you have become a practiced (and practical) paleographer. After all, even practical paleography is a moving encounter.

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#### END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This practical information may also include the cost, if any, of a reader's card. Neither the BL nor Lambeth Palace charge.

<sup>2</sup>If you are planning on editing an edition of a Middle English work, I suggest you consult the following: Vincent McCarren and Douglas Moffat, eds., *A Guide to Editing Middle English* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>See John Whittaker, "The Practice of Manuscript Collation," *Text* 5(1991): 121-30, for more details about this process.

<sup>4</sup>IPMEP, eds. N. F. Blake and A. S. G. Edwards (New York: Index Society, 1985); IMEV (New York: Index Society, 1943). There is a *Supplement* to IMEV, edited by Rossell Hope Robbins and J. L. Cutler (Lexington, 1965). The IMEP volumes are published by Cambridge University Press.

<sup>5</sup>For Middle English, this would include M. B. Parkes, *English Cursive*.

*Book Hands, 1250-1500* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969; rpt. Berkeley: U California P, 1979); A. G. Petti, *English Literary Book Hands from Chaucer to Dryden* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977); C. E. Wright, *English Vernacular Hands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1960), among others.

<sup>6</sup>Of course, an author might choose to retain the original wording, even if it is sexist by modern standards. I don't mean to imply that this is not an option; however, in light of our changing language and academy, it is problematic to retain such antiquated and politically charged language without an explanation.